Introduction
Ceremony and the Regional Spirit

We come into the sun out of the mystery of silence and move toward the dark wisdom of silence; we manage to make an amazing deal of noise by the way.

Let me cite two texts as background to the words that are to follow, words that must attempt a just correspondence to the reality of our existence as intellectual creatures. The first is an epigraph that Ezra Pound cites approvingly: "Intelligence is international; stupidity is national; art is local." The second is from an essay by Allen Tate called "The New Provincialism," in which he expresses alarm over our civilization's general decay from the local: "Regionalism is . . . limited in space but not in time. The provincial attitude is limited in time but not in space. . . . [P]rovincialism is that state of mind in which regional men lose their origin in the past and its continuity into the present, and begin every day as if there had been no yesterday."

With Pound, I take poetry or any making by intellect as necessarily local. For intellect uses the world immediately adjacent to the poet's mind and senses, whatever modifications his mind may give it in an attempt upon the universal. It uses the language the poet hears, or thinks he hears, however he may adapt that language to his sense of form. Time and place nevertheless are always threats to language, as they are to man, who is by his soundest differentiation the user of signs, of "language." Time and space limit language's spirit, even as they also threaten to overcome that spirit that announces itself through language. The world's threat, the dangers of time and place, is inevitable, given the soul's anxiety for autonomy. That is, time and place burden soul with insistences upon its finiteness. The world that particularizes finite soul, let us say, is a tyrannical host to any person, and so of necessity to the poet. There are two senses of *tyrannical host* here, the juxtaposition of which suggests the world's threatening sustenance: *tyrannical* on the one hand as we speak it of Pisistratus at Greece's high point, or on the other of Stalin; *host* as we speak it of Chaucer's Franklin, or of the oak's relation to mistletoe.

The local—the world adjacent, as revealed to the poet's mind—is consequently the poet's relevant concern insofar as he hopes to transcend time and place by his poetry. The greatest of our poets know this; and so do we teachers

or readers, in consequence of which those burdens to poetry signified by time and place are concerns we must address in our attempt to understand the effect of great poetry upon us. After the profound effect of *Oedipus the King* upon us, who does not become fascinated with fifth-century Athens? And so on down the line—you supply the poems and poets of thirteenth-century Florence, fourteenth- and sixteenth-century London, nineteenth-century Paris, twentieth-century Nashville. For the poet's reader no less than for himself, the local—the coincidence of event with time and place—threatens the larger resonances of that event called poetry, whose proper arena is a timeless placelessness. The danger of time and place to poetry is the possible entrapment of poetry by history.

Now the problem the poet has in achieving a transcendence of the local in his art—in moving his art beyond the jealous intrusions of the local—does not lie in his struggle with time and place so that he may escape them, as if escape were the primary end, though this has been the poet's general inclination in my lifetime. As if one might by going to New York or London or Paris thereby throw off all the iron weights upon the wings of his song. Such is an enduring temptation to the poet, one that Dante rejects dramatically at the outset of his great poem: his pilgrim may not climb the Mountain of Hope before he goes into and through the dark world so palpably local. The first necessity is to address time and place, engage the realities of finite existence as directly experienced. And so Dante performs that symbolic drama by descending where hope is all but abandoned, into Hell, as prelude to an awakening on Purgatory. Throughout, his poem is freighted most marvelously with the local, but most especially in his Hell. And through the bearing of that weight of the local, he arrives at last at a moment of vision, a resolution of his journey. After which, however, he must return to the presence of time and place, back into this present moment in this discrete place to sing his journey.

If great poetry is of necessity local, we may I believe distinguish it from a lesser poetry that also uses the local. That is, some poetry may be said to be *provincial* rather than *regional*, in Tate's senses of those terms. It is a regional deportment toward the world of the local, I believe, that leads to a transcendence of the local, for the poet no less than for those of separate callings, since by nature all are intellectual creatures. Dante's election of vulgar Italian is evidence of a stirring regional spirit put in operation against a provincial attitude toward Latin as the necessary instrument of any high poetry, an attitude incidentally that brought Latin's death at last. And Shakespeare's address to Plutarch might exasperate a Ben Jonson, but it leads to that sort of "regionalizing," that, as E. A. Robinson puts it (into Ben Jonson's mouth), allows Shakespeare to fill

. . . out of his
Miraculous inviolable increase
. . . Ilion, Rome, or any town you like
Of olden time with timeless Englishmen.

Whether a poet turn out to be provincial or regional in his bearing toward the local is determined, I would have it, by a piety that is almost presumptuous. Piety here is the discriminating reverence through which the poet takes and uses the local, and the threat of presumption lies in his *taking*. Piety is the mode of his ceremonial awareness of time and place. (I define ceremonial awareness as an action, whether or not words are said aloud.) The poet *must* use the local, that which is mediate through his senses to mind of the transcendent. But as we have been saying, he may use the local in a provincial or regional way. The difference is revealed by his deportment in relation to his origins and in relation to the immediacy of the time and place that impinge upon his discrete being. In respect to provincialism, consider that the terms *academic* and *beat*, as applied to poets, have been about equally terms of derision. When either term is used in derogation, it is intended to carry some of the onus in our term *provincial*. *Academic* poetry means poetry that takes form to be a mechanical relating of metrics to metaphor by wit, sanctioned primarily by history, the whole activity of this poetry at last divorced of the poet's commitment to *what* he is saying or to *that* of which he speaks. On the other hand, *beat* poetry means those ceremonies of naive innocence "full of passionate intensity," whose origins the beat poet takes to be at least no more remote than that last great "happening" for his benefit, whether World War II, or the Korean War, or the Vietnam War, or, in dull times, Irangate.

But whether regionally or provincially academic or beat, all poetry has one aspect in common—some degree of the ceremonial. From Homer's invocation of the muse to Allen Ginsberg's mad incantation of his own spirit through a catalog of epithets. Whatever the use or abuse, it is through the ceremonial that one may recover that regional state of awareness of existence that I hold desirable. Indeed, *regional* as I mean it is that state of mind in which one is most acutely aware of the necessity of those ceremonies of innocence that Yeats announces our age to have lost. His lines are desperate ones, perhaps the most often quoted from his vast work, though honored more for their apparent topical (*provincial*) cogency than for their timeless virtues. They do touch a sore spot in decaying community, but the symptom of soreness—even of acute pain—if taken to be merely topical loses recognition that community is always in decay. Yeats remarked, between wars, that

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

> Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

Spiritual and intellectual maturity, which I assume as desirable, is a growth in which the blood-dimmed tide of the self is reduced from that anarchy bred always in any time or place by the phantom desire of individual autonomy. A poet might put it that, through ceremony, the blood of the self and the bread of the local become transformed beyond the mere provincialities of self or of place. Maturity in the soul is a growth from that provincialism, into which the individual soul always finds itself born, toward a regionalism which requires of it, for instance, that "brotherly deference" Confucius speaks of or that "charity" Saint Paul extols as making us members one of another. But to arrive at that awareness means we travel a long path, one that T. S. Eliot speaks of, having labored it himself. He says in "Little Gidding," "the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time." That is, maturity in the discrete person is reached when he returns to the local, himself transformed, as Dante the man must do if he is to be adequate as Dante the poet to the demands of a *Divine Comedy*. That is the burden of the greatest poetry, whether the spectacle of the *Odyssey* or the agony of *Oedipus* or the visionary triumph of the *Divine Comedy*. It would be simplistic, of course, to suppose that I mean here that one must literally return to the geographical point of his origin. That would be to misunderstand *arrive* in Eliot's words as Nicodemus misunderstands Christ's teaching that one must be born again. In neither saying is there the fundamental meaning that one must enter a second time into his mother's womb or into the point of place in time from which he came.

As poet, living in the shadow of these and other great strains built on supreme theme, I have been fortunate in the local. I came to an awareness of ceremonial necessities to our fallen innocence when those ceremonies were still practiced more generally than now, though they were in obvious decay for reasons that my own provincialism prevented me from understanding. (I repeat, each is born into a provincialism of the self, whatever the actualities of his time and place.) I recall now that my grandfather held a position in his family, whether blessing the family meal or presiding at the fall hog-killing, that few of my contemporaries hold as fathers or will as grandfathers. His was a position maintained through forms of ceremony more ancient than he, through which

he acknowledged nature's seasons and his own responsibilities, however imperfect and unarticulated his acknowledgment. An important inheritance colored our family activities, though it was not valued always as warranted. But nevertheless such gifts always linger for the taking. And there is no statute of limitations on our coming into possession, short of death itself.

But to ceremony. Ceremony is the form of active participation in being, in celebration of the gifts of being. Thus ceremony may move us beyond a merely natural provincialism through an openness to existence itself. Ceremonies are the forms through which we discover ourselves at least higher than vegetable or animal without our depreciation of vegetable or animal; the forms whereby we acknowledge with generosity of spirit the existence of that which is separate from the self. Thus at last we may come to that most difficult generosity of all, that whereby we truly value our own self. Ceremony is necessary to that sanity and health whereby we can say that we are at home in the world, and know thereby that at a higher level we are only acceptable guests of being for a brief duration of time and place. That is the point at which we turn to the local and see it for the first time.

At its most basic, ceremony is orderly awareness toward existence. Its most immediate instrument, given our created nature, is language. Which means that, in high poetry, form is neither mechanical nor arbitrary. It is the ceremonial use of language helping to direct desire so that desire may prove worthy of the desiring soul, a point perhaps neglected by too many poets, academic or beat. Language implies an imperative nature in ceremony, whether one look to the grammar of a sentence or to the meter, rhyme, logic of a sonnet. The major poets of our century—Yeats, Eliot, Pound, the Nashville Fugitives—have felt that at certain points of our history there was a more general respect for the ceremonial nature of language than in our own age. They recognized in history as well periods very like our own in which ceremony was in rapid decay. I cite one indication of such decay; Thucydides says, in the *Peloponnesian Wars* 3.82–84, discussing that growth of provincialism which destroyed the Greek states: "The meaning of words had no longer the same relation to things. . . . An attitude of perfidious antagonism everywhere prevailed; for there was no word binding enough nor oath terrible enough to reconcile enemies." And before Thucydides, Euripides dramatized the point tellingly in *Medea*, when Medea and King Aegeus attempt to discover an oath sufficiently strong to bind themselves in an agreement with mutual benefit. Of course the danger to the prophetic poet, if he underline a provincialism become dominant at a particular time in a particular place, is the wrath of the provincial mind. We remember that Euripides died in exile.

Ours, then, is not the only age plagued by "credibility gaps." And our Thucydides (one of them), Ezra Pound, for fifty years warned us to look to our

language, lest we find ourselves overcome by disorderly unawareness. Still, the vestigial manifestations of ceremony have become for us increasingly routine and mechanical, largely under the pressures of technology. We have virtually abandoned intelligence. Government forms to be filled out in quadruplicate, filed alphabetically, then thrown in the trash can; or worse entered into the computer to determine each individual by button pushing. Our traffic rituals involved in getting home through the evening rush hour. Our envelope mailing to the Community Chest at the end of the month when we pay the light bill. Discrimination lost through language abandoned, it is little wonder that one take any piece of music or art or any poem to be as good as any other—so long as none of them breaks too disturbingly into our nervously autonomous awareness. We have become accustomed to, and prefer, only a foggy throbbing of the heart, one still allowed insofar as we are sufficiently isolated in our self from the techniques of technology. Meanwhile, technique, void of ceremony, becomes the Black Mass of the provincial mind. On the point, see Jacques Ellul's *Technological Society*.

Ceremony, let me insist, is an imperative wherever and whenever there is a legitimate necessity of addressing oneself to something or someone other than the self. Impious ceremony, dispirited technique, is the mechanical, though self-conscious, conduct of the self in nature and society, whether we are *On the Road* with Jack Kerouac or caught up in sterilized iambics with the "Cornbelt Metaphysicals," as Kenneth Rexroth characterized the academic poets of his day. As poet, I am disturbed that impious ceremony dominates life as well as art; the symptoms are in the order of precedence in our traffic rituals, whether in freeway competition or doorway competition; whether in the presence of stranger to stranger, teacher to pupil, father to son. The four-way stop on our roads is its parable. We have manner still; and so long as it yields efficiency we defer to manner. But we have lost manners, the rituals of community ceremony, the tradition of community beyond mere history or mechanics.

Consider the ceremonial aspects of this most common experience: we each of us on occasion, and many as a matter of routine (that is, ritual voided of the ceremonial), stop at some Burger Haven for a hamburger, french fries, milkshake. In a building vaguely reminiscent of the temple, we encounter a hierarchy of servers, each related to the other by technological rank. They are likely to wear robes of office, inscribed shirt and cap at least. They perform a service through the disciplines of technique, vaguely reminiscent of ritual. The immediate priest at the window performs the final act to absolve us of our hunger. From the beginning of the operation we witness gestures of communion, but they are gestures from which the significance of "give us this day our daily bread" has been rather carefully removed through the dictates of technology, the new god of our international provincialism. Any spilled orange juice (or in

the new ceremonial language, "0.J.") is hardly a libation. What we witness is mechanism usurping message, technique absorbing any virtues of piety toward the mediating local, most immediately the hamburger in hand.

When I consider my awareness of myself in this blind new world of the Burger Temple and reflect on the lost piety toward existence in its mechanics of ceremony, when I remember at least my grandfather's table, I must conclude that the Burger Temple hardly feeds the body what is required, however fresh the beef or vitamin-added the 0.J. One grants an efficiency; the Temple serves a multitude, and the biological body itself may flourish. It is even possible in such deadening routine perhaps to recover living ceremony. But only if we don't develop an ulcer from a nagging spirit in us still ravenous for food raised by proper ceremony to the virtues of daily bread, without which we perish—ourselves merely a sacrificial food to the new god, technology.

I have a rather dark view of the possibilities of our survival as "Western" civilization, of our survival as a particular nation. I have too regularly borne in upon me the evidence that "stupidity is national," evidence that intelligence lusting after provincial internationalism loses the art of the local, so that only by calamity or accident does it seem possible to return to the local and know it in a "regional" way—that is, under the aspect of eternity. My view will seem a dark one to many. But I also see cause for hope, the same cause that has always been present for a recovery from any decline in any epoch. That is why I am most constantly concerned with a particular institution in which the ceremonies of innocence have been traditionally exalted, from Homer's day to our own, though it is an institution in rapid decay in our time, so distressingly rapid the decay that we need reminding often that so it was at Athens in Thucydides' day and at Rome when Petronius wrote his black-humor novel, *The Satyricon*.

I mean, of course, the institution we call the family, now so much a popular concern. What I urge as necessary to community recovery is the restoration of ceremony in the family. Only so may there be any stability possible in this third great wave of Western history now ebbing from us. There is certainly little hope of recovery in those *techniques* for family recovery, considered and argued for and acted upon, that take origin in abstractionism by institute or agency. However empowered, they must fail. For it is only from ceremony recovered at the most local level that one may learn the piety necessary to the recovery of family, a piety such as that which bound Telemachus and Odysseus, Anchises and Aeneas to Ascanius. Otherwise, family must become itself a miniature agency for the operation of technique, a block in the pyramid raised to technology. Family is corporate, but not in a legal sense. More literally, family is a body in nature raised by ceremony in a sacramental way beyond the merely natural, though always permeated by the natural. Out of ceremony—the discipline of body and mind in respect to the self as the self must relate to all that is not

itself—out of ceremony eventually is recovered a manner of being larger than the naturally provincial being of the child before he finds his place in the family and in a community of families. A reverence for family, as does the reverence for self, leads to reverence of selves and families of selves. Thus only may be restored the prospect of viable—life-giving—civilization.

It is to the family that we must look for such recovery. And we may with some expectation and hope look to the poet in this struggle for recovery. For his is the gift of words sacramentally transformed through piety, through his "regional" address to being, that may recover to us lost and forgotten ways of our proper being in the world. But lest we be misled by a sentimentally attractive Utopian desire for such recovery, and thus made susceptible to hopelessness, we must remember always Saint Paul's caution to the Hebrews: "Here we have no continuing city." We might remember as well Eliot's imperative words against that despair that always succeeds the collapse of piety: "if the Temple is to be cast down / We must first build the Temple." And always, in any time or place, we build the temple of stones from the rubble. As we turn back to those stones strewn amid history's rubble, back to the local which we must encounter in this very moment in this very place, it is possible we may recover a visionary moment, recognizing that the end of all our exploring has indeed pointed to our returning whence we started to see that place truly for the first time. Always, from that moment, we must move on in time and place, though perhaps with firmer assurance that at last "all manner of thing shall be well."